

# Aikido class teaches self-defense, focus

story and Photos by Spc. Alexandra Hemmerly-Brown

**LSA ANACONDA, Iraq**—“*One does not need buildings, money, power, or status to practice the Art of Peace. Heaven is right where you are standing, and that is the place to train.*” — Morihei Ueshib, founder of Aikido

The above words were spoken by the man who founded the modern martial art form, Aikido, in the 1920s.

Aikido is a self-defense discipline which is non-competitive, but centered on harmonizing with your universal life force, or ‘Ki.’ According to the Japanese philosophy every person has a Ki, it just needs to be stimulated out of its dormant state.

“It’s not brut strength, it comes from your Ki, from inside,” said Sgt. 1st Class Stephen Y. Chinen of Mililani, Hawaii, with the 657th Area Support Group here, who teaches an Aikido class three days per week.

Chinen, the installation chaplain’s assistant noncommissioned officer in charge, who is an elementary school counselor in Hawaii, volunteered to teach the class shortly after arriving at Anaconda.

“I saw it as an opportunity to further my growth,” Chinen said after seeing a flyer at the gym for wanted martial arts instructors.

Chinen was introduced to the method in 1978 when, as a University of Hawaii student he took a world religions class where his professor spoke of Aikido.

He said learning about the discipline in school encouraged him to join a dojo (or place of training) nearby, where he began to train.

Spurred by a desire to learn more about the martial art, his heritage, and the language, Chinen went to Japan in the 1980s where he stayed for more than six years.

There Chinen studied Japanese and trained diligently in Aikido at a traditional dojo, where as a student he had to perform disciplinary work such as cleaning toilets as part of his education.

He returned to Hawaii in 1991 as a black belt.

Aikido has a belting system similar to other martial arts, which awards trainees different colored belts depending on how many hours they have trained and passed required tests, Chinen said.

Chinen said he was awarded his black belt after eight years, but the length of time it takes to move up in Aikido’s ranking system can vary greatly depending on how often a student can practice, he said.

A core element to learning Aikido is the practice of finding one’s tanden, or “one point.” Located two inches below the navel and one inch inwards, one’s tanden is the physical center of gravity, the point from which a person’s energy is focused.

According to its doctrine, an Aikido student should draw upon his or her tanden when in a fight, and focus all movements from their core.

“That’s where your energy and power come from,” Chinen explained.

In Aikido, practitioners should be able to defend themselves without injuring their opponent. Using take-downs, pressure points, and balance, Aikido students can overpower an opponent of any size, he said.

The Aikido method, as practiced by actor Steven Seagal, is a martial art for all ages and

body types, Chinen said.

“Live as you train, train as you live,” Chinen, who joined the National Guard and later the Reserves after returning to Hawaii in the 1990s said is one of his mottos. Chinen considers Aikido a way of life, and wanted to teach it to others.

Being his first deployment, Chinen said he didn’t think he would be able to practice Aikido this year, and is grateful he has the chance to share his art form with others.

“His class is very solid and principle-rich,” said Staff Sgt. Richard M. Harris from Phoenix, Ariz., with the 164th Corps Support Group.

Harris, who has been taking Chinen’s class, is also an instructor of Aikijujutsu here at the Air Force compound. Aikijujutsu is a modified form of Aikido which has integrated more combative and attack-based techniques into it.

“Because I know what Aikido is, I wanted to study the traditional approach from him,” Harris said.

Harris, who has been here for two months, said he planned ahead to practice Aikido here.

“I knew I’d be able to practice it here, it was just a matter of with who,” he said.

A 10-year veteran of the art form, Harris also calls it a way of life, and has introduced it to his three boys, ages 5, 10, and 18.

“It’s a great stress-reliever, to get your mind off of being in the zone,” Harris said of practicing Aikido in Iraq.

In the first class he has taught by himself, Chinen stresses taking up the opportunity of getting involved in any martial art. He encourages servicemembers to come and observe his class, and if they find it’s not for them, then to try another class.

“It is my chosen path in life,” Chinen said.



Sgt. 1st Class Stephen y. Chinen (right) shows a student some Aikido take-downs.



The Aikido class bows in closing, showing respect to each participant.